OUR WORLD AND ITS WILDERNESS

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By HOWARD ZAHNISER
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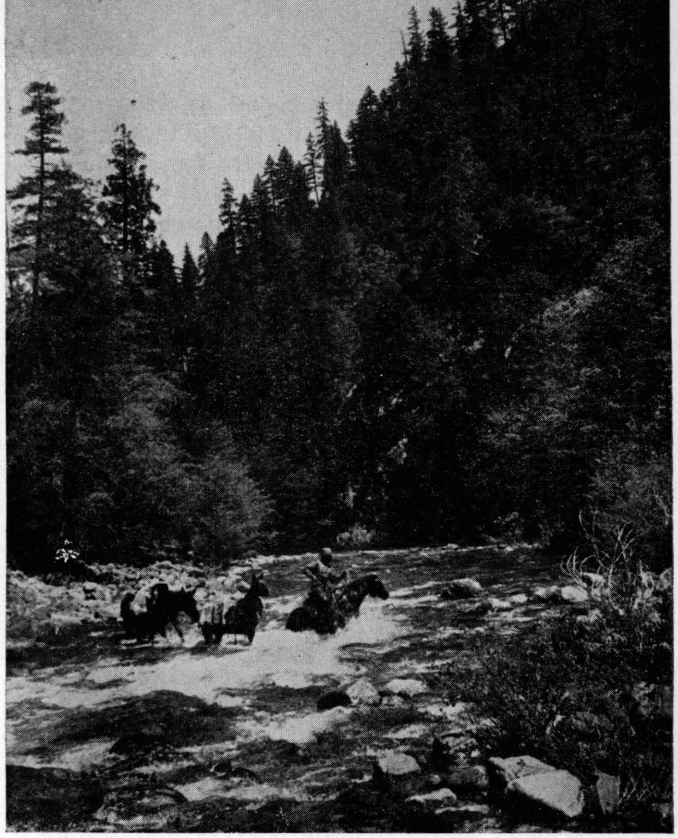
[Photos Through Courtesy of Living Wilderness]



Scene in Kalunopsis Wild Area, Siskiyou National Forest, Oregon.

FROM within our sheltering walls and fast-moving vehicles our American world seems far removed from the wilderness. The wilderness we have "conquered" and from its raw materials have built a civilization in which we have protected ourselves from hardships and freed ourselves to a great extent from many of our natural limitations.

Yet, wilderness preservation has certainly become one of our American purposes, an essential part of a distinctively modern movement for the conservation of natural resources—upon which, it is recognized, the survival of our civilized culture depends. The more highly developed our culture has become the greater our appreciation of wilderness has grown. The more we have enjoyed the ease and security of our civilization the more we have also valued the hardships and hazards—the adventure—of wilderness excursions. The farther we have come in our programs for *managing* our world the greater has become our appreciation of the significance of the observations to be made in areas where natural processes go on *unmodified* by man.

As we have thus achieved the opportunity of leisure to enjoy ourselves and reflect on our progress and our destiny, we have come to realize that the wilderness in all its wildness is important to us, and we have determined to preserve it as a resource of health and inspiration, of knowledge and understanding. We have come to realize that we ourselves are creatures of the wild. In the wilderness we are at home; in maintaining our access to wildness we are not, as some have thought, escaping from life but rather keeping ourselves in touch with true reality, the fundamental reality of the universe of which we are a part. We call it recreation and often, most fortunately, know its deep benefits through simple enjoyment of a good time. Yet so deliberate and calculated has all our living grown that we have come to realize that we must be aware of the true meaning of our wilderness. If we are truly to preserve its values, we must recognize that its essential importance to us is indeed in its wildness.

Henry David Thoreau, who in his essay on "Walking" declared that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World," was one of the first Americans to point out this significance of wilderness. Even in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, even before the frontier was gone—he argued for wilderness preservation. Why shouldn't we have "our national preserves," asked Thoreau as he concluded one of his essays, "Chesuncook," in *The Maine Woods:* "To hold and preserve" man himself as "the lord of creation—not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation?" Thoreau perceived, as he wrote in *Walden,* that our life "would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it," and he emphasized—

> "We need the tonic of wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed, and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks,

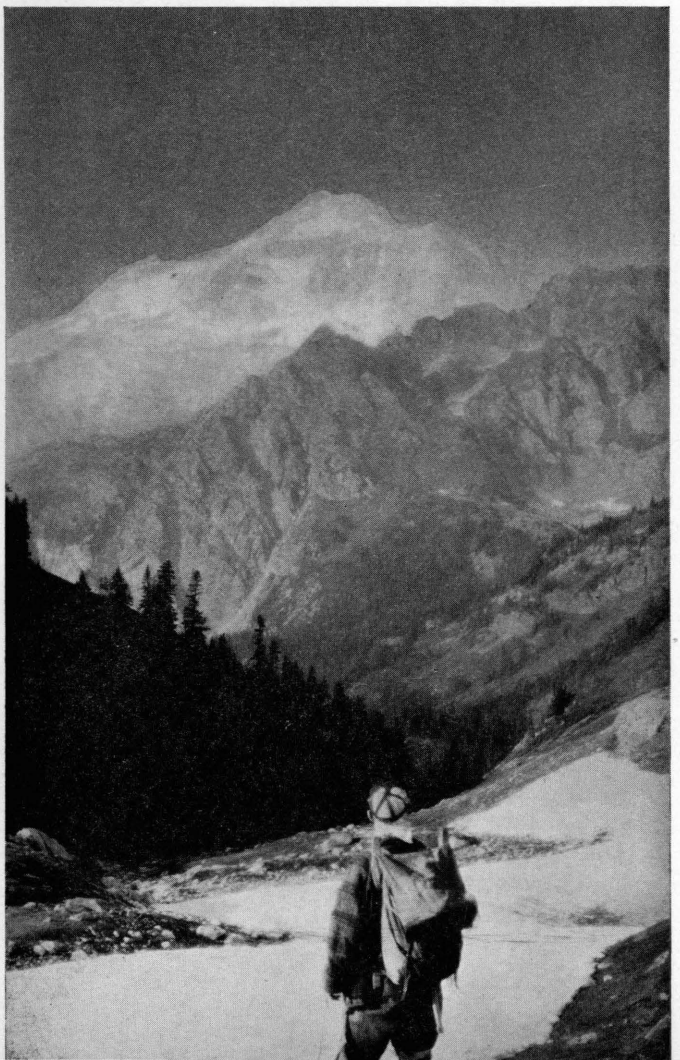
the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander."

Our National Park System Was Started

First published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858, Thoreau's plea for national preserves was published (posthumously) in *The Maine Woods,* in 1864, the same year in which the United States government made its first provision for what we now recognize as wilderness preservation. The federal government then, by an Act of Congress approved by President Lincoln on June 30, 1864, granted the Yosemite Valley to the state of California upon the condition that it should be "held for public use, resort, and recreation." Two decades later, by an Act of Congress approved by President Grant on March 1, 1872, Yellowstone National Park was "dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." Provision was made for the "preservation, from injury or spoliation of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park, and their retention in their natural condition."

The brilliant and significant surveys and studies begun by the young Verplanck Colvin in New York State's Adirondacks in the 1870's, were at this same time, leading to the laws and constitutional provisions that before the end of the century had firmly dedicated the Adirondack wilderness to protection by the State, "forever wild."

Glacier Peak in Washington State.



John Muir in his *Atlantic Monthly* sketches was doing his best "to show forth the beauty, grandeur, and all-embracing usefulness of our wild mountain forest reservations and parks, with a view to inciting the people to come and enjoy them, and get them into their hearts, that so at length their preservation and right use might be made sure."

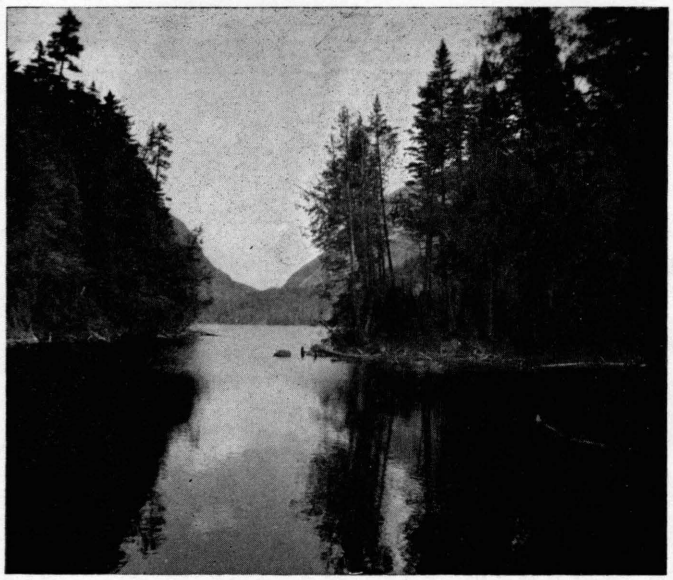
When the National Park Service was established in 1916, under the leadership of Stephen Mather—some two years after John Muir's passing, on Christmas Eve in 1914—there were 14 national parks, besides 33 national monuments, in the national park system. There had also been established 153 forest reservations, within which were the great wildernesses destined to be prserved as the primitive, wild, wilderness and roadless areas of the national forests.

From the Southwest, where on August 25, 1924, the "type specimen" of these areas was established by regional administrative action in the Gila National Forest, Aldo Leopold had begun to point out to the nation both the importance—recreational and ecological—of the national forest wildernesses and the growing threats to their persistence. By the 1930's a national policy for wilderness preservation in the national forests had emerged. The great wilderness interpreter and champion, Robert Marshall—forester, thinker, writer, philanthropist, who had learned wilderness in the "forever wild" Adirondacks, (where with two companions he had been first to climb all 46 of the peaks 4,000 feet high or higher, and who had seen also the great western areas of still living wilderness "melting away like the last snowbank on some south-facing mountainside during a hot afternoon in June")—Robert Marshall—had not only written his now classic interpretation, *The Problem of the Wilderness,* in the February 1930 *Scientific Monthly,* but had also achieved his position on the staff of the U.S. Forest Service. He was able to contribute notably to the establishment of areas for preservation and to the formulation of regulations for their protection.

Wilderness as the Key to Conservation

Thus it was by our 1940's, through the influence of such men as Henry Thoreau, Verplanck Colvin, John Muir, Stephen Mather, Aldo Leopold, and Robert Marshall, and the growing sense among many men and women of the enduring importance of wilderness, that we had in our national forests, and in other federal and state areas, a great wilderness preservation system.

Through this system of preserved areas will, in time, exist, not only in fact but by virtue of Congressional legislation giving it a perpetuity, a national wilderness preservation system. We must propose to maintain our



Avalanche Lake in the Adirondacks.

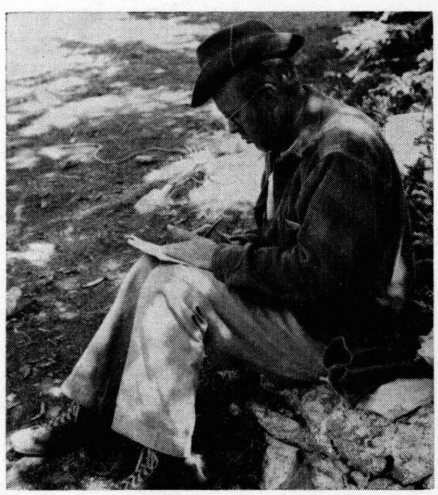
access to wildness, what John Muir called "fountains of life." Our expansive civilization, we realize, will eventually modify for human exploitation every last area on the earth—except those that through human foresight and wisdom have been deliberately set aside for preservation. Through such a zoning program, nevertheless, we are persuaded, we can insure the existence of a system of wilderness forever. It is not too late. Half of a hundred areas in our national park system, six dozen and more areas within our national forests, a few of our national wildlife refuges, certain of our state parks, and other areas within the public domain and on Indian reservations are still wilderness —and in public ownership.

Elsewhere we know we can obtain the timber and mineral commodities we need and shall need. There we will find the needed sites for our great dams and reservoirs, build the roads and landing fields for our mechanical travel in the great outdoors, find also the places for our outdoor recreation with the conveniences and facilities we so well contrive, and in short realize all the benefits that we want from a *developed* country.

In our wilderness we shall see preserved the unmodified wildness of our primeval origins, our natural home—the areas of unspoiled nature. Here we not only can seek relief from the stress and strain of our civilized living but can seek also that true understanding of our past, ourselves, and our world, which will enable us to enjoy the conveniences and liberties of our urbanized, industrialized, mechanized civilization. And yet we will not sacrifice an awareness of our human existence as spiritual creatures nurtured and sustained by and from the great community of life on this earth.

In our continuing access to wilderness—where we can learn the humility to see ourselves truly as the dependent members of this great community of all life—is our continuing hope for the survival of our culture. As a species, a race, a form of life, we actually run a risk of annihilation if we forget *conservation.* We can see—and through our science fairly well understand—what happens to forests when conservation has nothing to do with tree cutting. We can see what happens to the soil—perhaps our greatest heritage from the Earth community's long past—when we try to use *it* without regard for its natural place in the scheme of living of which we are a part. We know that when ever, or wherever too many game mammals or birds are shot, or too many fish caught, we can no longer enjoy this resource. Sometimes we have even seen ourselves destroy an entire species and sacrifice forever our own enjoyment and benefits that once came from it. Yet all these are in a sense merely warnings, and we know now that our conservation to be truly successful must arise, not from a too selfish concern for our own day, but rather from a sense of ourselves as a responsible part of a continuing community of life.

From the wilderness we truly gain this sense and thus in wilderness preservation we see a key to all our conservation problems. From our contact with it and its continuing influence, comes the understanding to deal wisely with all the resources of the Earth which we share now, but which will be the need of those who come after us.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Mr. Zahniser has been serving as executive secretary of the Wilderness Society since World War II. Previous to this time he worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Plant Industry.

One of his main interests is editing *The Living Wilderness,* which is a quarterly published by the Wilderness Society. He is also book editor of *Nature Magazine* and contributes there the monthly article called "Nature in Print."